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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000873

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SUBJECT: SMOULDERING SYRIAN-SAUDI TENSIONS FLARE AT AN
INOPPORTUNE MOMENT FOR BASHAR

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Classified By: Charge D'Affaires Michael H. Corbin for reason 1.4 b/d

1.(C) SUMMARY. Syrian vice president Farouq al-Shara'a triggered considerable Saudi anger with his August 14 comments on Saudi Arabia's "paralysis" on regional issues. The speech sparked more than a week of escalated rhetoric and widespread media speculation, though no official statements have been issued since August 18. Criticism of Damascus has emanated from parties sympathetic to Saudi Arabia, particularly in Lebanon, and has also raised questions about Syrian subservience to Iran. The reactions of Embassy contacts to Shara'a's speech range from dismissal of a free-lancing vice-president to musings on whether Shara'a was articulating a coordinated Syrian stance. In either case, Shara'a's remarks reflected real SARG displeasure with Riyadh over a number of issues, including: the Saudi absence from the Iraq Border Security Working Group in early August; frustration with Riyadh's stance on Arab-Israeli issues; and the continued clash of interests over Lebanon. President Asad will probably seek to prevent the row from escalating further, in order to smooth the way for Syria to host the 2008 Arab League summit in Damascus. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) SHARA'A IGNITES A WAR OF WORDS. Syrian Vice President Farouq al-Shara'a sparked a week of escalated rhetoric and widespread media speculation on a renewed Syrian-Saudi rift with his remarks on August 14 to Syrian media on Saudi Arabia's role as a regional leader. Shara'a described the Saudi government as "paralyzed" in its ability to lead on regional issues. He cited the collapse of the February 2007 Mecca Agreement between Fatah and Hamas, asserting that it was brokered in Damascus but transferred to Riyadh, to accommodate the Saudi desire to announce the agreement and assume the lead on its fulfillment. Shara'a also criticized Riyadh's absence from the early August meeting in Damascus of the Iraq Border Security Working Group (BSWG), noting that Riyadh could have sent a "low-rank embassy employee" if it had reservations but instead deliberately chose to leave its seat vacant.

13. (U) Saudi Arabia responded sharply to Shara'a's comments. An August 16 statement carried by the Saudi Press Agency quoted an unnamed Saudi official rejecting the "lies and contradictions" of Shara'a's "repugnant" remarks and accusing Damascus of fomenting "chaos" in the region. The Saudis issued their riposte despite an unsuccessful attempt to defuse tensions by Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem. In

an August 15 interview with Dubai-based satellite television station, Al-Arabiyah, Muallem asserted the strength of Syrian ties with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, noting recurrent state visits, including Syrian participation in the March 2007 Arab League summit in Riyadh (Note: There have been no high-level, official Saudi visits to Damascus since late 2005. End note). Official public exchanges on the issue ended on August 18, with a Syrian statement reported by the Syrian Arab News Agency expressing "regret" for the Saudi "distortion" of Shara'a's remarks.

14. (U) The official silence since August 18 has been filled by widespread media commentary and barbs traded among regional actors sympathetic to each side, particularly from Saudi supporters. In Lebanon, politicians affiliated with the anti-Syrian governing coalition -- including March 14 leader Sa'ad Hariri -- criticized Shara'a's "lies and offenses" and accused elements of the opposition of pursuing a SARG-orchestrated effort to undermine Saudi reconciliation efforts in Lebanon. The Saudi-owned, London-based daily, Al-Sharq al-Awsat, reported August 25 on security threats to the Saudi Ambassador in Lebanon that prompted his temporary recall to Riyadh. The report did not explicitly point a finger at Syria, but noted comments from Saudi officials that it is "easy to guess the scheming quarters" responsible for the threats. Subsequent reporting from Dubai-based al-Arabiyah television included quotes from Saudi officials positing the involvement of SARG proxies. Saudi pique over Shara'a's remarks also was evident in news coverage of Syrian opposition elements known to irritate the SARG. Saudi paper, Abha al-Watan, ran interviews criticizing Shara'a and the Syrian regime with former Syrian Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam and Syrian Muslim Brotherhood leader Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanuni, including extensive discussion by Bayanuni of the need for regime change in Damascus.

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15. (U) INSINUATING SYRIAN ALLEGIANCE TO IRAN. Criticism of Damascus also has been infused with allegations of the SARG's questionable commitment to Arab unity and its true allegiance to Iran. An August 21 article in Al-Sharq al-Awsat derided Syrian claims to be the "beating heart of pan-Arabism," instead cataloguing the various ways in which President Bashar al-Asad has become "subservient" to Iranian interests.

More generally, the theme of Syrian-Saudi tension as a manifestation of a broader struggle between Iran and the United States has been posited by a range of observers. Andrew Tabler, editor of the English-language monthly, Syria Today, described the Syria-Saudi row to the Associated Press as a "war by proxy" between the United States and Iran, noting the potential for spillover into Lebanon -- where Syria and Saudi Arabia are already at odds -- and Iraq, where their support of Sunni interests should otherwise generate common ground.

16. (C) A CALCULATED JAB AT RIYADH? The reactions of Embassy contacts to Shara'a's remarks range from dismissal of a free-lancing vice president to musings over whether Shara'a was articulating a coordinated SARG stance. Shara'a is known to stray "off message," noted a Western diplomatic colleague, who asserted that he appears less frequently at public events than favored regime speakers, such as Information Minister Mohsen Bilal, Foreign Minister Walid Muallem, and Expatriates Minister Buthayna Sha'aban. (Note. Shara'a delivered his remarks at the Arab Cultural Center in Mezzeh in an annual address to celebrate Journalists Day. End note.) One Arab journalist based in Damascus, shrugged off any lasting impact from the speech, though he mused that the vice president's ability to speak so freely might signal a temporary increase in his stature within the regime.

17. (C) Other observers of the regime offer contrary assessments of Shara'a's standing. A well-connected Syrian oil-industry contact -- who has acted as an informal conduit between the SARG and Iraq -- theorized that Shara'a launched

the diatribe against Riyadh to insulate himself against possible removal during an expected cabinet shuffle. Shara'a is using the vehement Saudi response to frame the feud as a Saudi attack on the regime, he added. If public criticism of Damascus continues, pressure will increase on Bashar to show that he can parry Saudi accusations, and Shara'a will again be preserved in his position into the future. Al-Hayat correspondent, Ibrahim Hamidi, also posited that Shara'a may be losing influence, noting that the SARG's recent opening to Iraq reflected Muallem's efforts. However, Hamidi did not link Shara'a's political fortunes to the speech. Though Shara'a may have crossed some boundaries in his rhetoric, Hamidi explained, he appeared to be sending a calculated message to Riyadh on Lebanon and Iraq as well as on regime concerns about Saudi meddling among Syria's Sunnis. Shara'a was telegraphing the SARG message that "we can make things difficult" in Lebanon if our interests are not met, asserted Hamidi.

18. (C) WHAT SET SHARA'A OFF? Syria and Saudi Arabia have been at odds, over Lebanon in particular, since the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri. Friction between the two states escalated markedly following the summer 2006 conflict in Lebanon, especially after Bashar publicly labeled unnamed Arab leaders "half-men." The tension ebbed briefly with Saudi King Abdullah's public embrace of Bashar at the Arab League summit in March, though their private meeting failed to generate lasting coordination on Lebanon. Hamidi recalled SARG frustration over Saudi rebuff of three separate invitations proffered by the SARG to Saudi foreign minister Saud al-Faisal. In late May, Muallem publicly demurred on the issue of improved bilateral coordination, noting that he still awaited "practical steps in this direction." In a further sign of deteriorating relations, Egypt's ambassador to Syria told the Charge weeks before Shara'a's comments that Syrian-Saudi relations were "awful" and the previously active Saudi ambassador in Damascus reportedly had stopped engaging the SARG during the last two months. We likewise have heard that the SARG has worked to limit Saudi access among Syrians.

19. (C) Though Lebanon remains the core issue of contention between the two states -- and over which disagreement is likely to deepen as the Lebanese presidential election nears -- the proximate cause of Shara'a's outburst appears to have

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been Saudi absence from the SARG-hosted Iraq BSWG in early August. Embassy contacts observe that the Saudi decision could have been attributed as much to distrust of multi-lateral dealings with the Iraqi government and their antipathy to Maliki as to anger at the SARG, as evidenced by the lack of Saudi participation in two prior Iraq working groups on energy and refugees. Most contacts interpreted the Saudi move as an expression of displeasure with both Syria and Iraq. The SARG nevertheless took umbrage at the diplomatic slight, and bristled at being left to bear the brunt of accusations about the movement of foreign fighters into Iraq when Damascus perceives Saudi responsibility for exporting jihadists.

110. (C) Shara'a's jab at Riyadh over Saudi leadership on the Palestinian issue also reflected SARG irritation with Riyadh's stance on Arab-Israeli issues. The SARG dissented during July 30 discussions among Arab League foreign ministers of a U.S. peace initiative. Though Syria's public comments highlighted their belief that Arab leaders should focus on healing the intra-Palestinian rift first, Damascus is also worried that it will be left out of any U.S.-sponsored gathering. The SARG was particularly incensed over Faisal's subsequent comments welcoming an international conference. SARG concerns may be alleviated somewhat by the August 24 interview of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in Egyptian weekly, Al-Akhbar al-Yom, in which he asserted that all Arab parties must be included in any peace conference. Damascus will be looking to translate Mubarak's comment into

strong Arab backing at a September 5 meeting of the Arab League committee formed to pursue the peace initiative (and reportedly chaired by Faisal) to ensure the Saudis sign on to a coordinated Arab position that supports Syria's view the process.

¶11. (C) COMMENT: Though it would be nothing new for Shara'a to exceed his brief in criticizing the Saudis so openly, his remarks nonetheless reflect tangible SARG displeasure with Riyadh and a real deterioration in the bilateral relationship. But SARG silence on the issue since its official statement on August 18 suggests the Syrian president probably seeks to prevent the row from escalating further. The SARG is strongly motivated to calm tempers in order to smooth the way for its scheduled hosting in Damascus of the 2008 Arab League summit. (Ironically, Shara'a opened his August 14 speech with his hope for the success of next year's summit to "correct the course of Arab-Arab relations.") The summit is of critical importance to Bashar's attempts to reduce Syria's isolation and portray himself as an influential Arab leader. Hosting the Arab League in Damascus would also reaffirm Syria's place as "the beating heart of pan-Arabism," and increase Bashar's room to maneuver as he continues to tread a fine line between allegiance to Arab interests and Syria's close relationship with Iran. Yet, if the more conspiratorial theories of Shara'a's maneuvering prove correct, it will be hard for Bashar to let Shara'a go or back down from direct attacks against him.

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